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Curtis Turns Over an Old Leaf

by PHILIP H. DOUGHERTY

Medical student, father of a former intelligence agent, automobile-parts manufacturer—that's Beurt R. Vaas.

Publisher, editor, byline writer, business college owner, Republican legislator, Bon Ami producer—that's Beurt Vaas, too. A man of many

one of the outstanding of this 53-year-old Indianapolis entrepreneur is his ability to resuscitate properties.

According to his account, exactly what he is doing with The Saturday Evening Post as chairman, president and largest stockholder of the Curtis Publishing Company.

And, in the case of The Post at least, it wasn't dying as dead; dead for two and a half years when he resurrected it in June, 1971, as a healthy-looking quarterly with a cover price of \$1.

It is now published six times a year and Mr. SerVaas said the other day that "if normalcy prevails" there would be nine issues in 1974 and the magazine would go monthly in 1975.

Although The Post once had a circulation of more than 7.5-million and lost money today, according to its publisher, it has a distribution of 800,000 and is making money.

"I discovered publishing was like manufacturing," he said, "you can't sell anything for less than the cost of the product."

To that revolutionary thought he added another: "If you try to run a business on advertising it's dangerous."

Of the total circulation, about 150,000 copies are subscriptions and, because Mr. SerVaas feels he is saving the reader the trouble of going for the magazine when he

subscribes, the subscription price is higher than newsstand price—ranging from \$1.25 to \$1.50 a copy.

About 450,000 copies are sold on newsstands and, it is understood, Curtis buys back any unsold copies and distributes them to hospitals.

When Mr. SerVaas announced in the fall of 1970 that he was bringing back The Post, he said it would be directed at middle America and be patriotic in tone.

But the conservative Republican publisher added the other day: "I'm not 105 percent American. I distrust people who are fanatics."

He is apparently reaching those he intended to reach.

Target Group Index in a recent syndicated media survey, he said, showed that Post readership followed the population curve "but the emphasis is in the heartland."

It also showed, much to the delight of Mr. SerVaas, that he was getting 5.7 readers a copy and that their average age was only 37.

Up to now the magazine has not had any audience research, which is a major handicap when trying to sell space. And, although The Post has lots of advertising, very little of it is from national advertisers.

Many of them are mail-order ads, some of which, Mr. SerVaas explained, he creates and runs for manufacturers who give him a wholesale price on the products. Some of the manufacturers, he said, have been impressed enough by the pulling power of the magazine that they've been converted to regular advertisers.

Editorially, The Post has been intentionally returned to the flavor of the nineteenth-thirties, the period for which Mr. SerVaas remembers the magazine the best.

Mr. SerVaas is its editor. His friend, John Burkhart, is editor of the editorial page. Mr. Burkhart, a conservative

Republican, is also president of the College University Corporation, a life insurance holding company.

Free copies of each issue are sent to members of Congress, governors and important appointed officials.

There has been an almost complete staff turnover at The Post and also on Holiday, which began publishing again last year as a bimonthly. Much of the criticism by those who have left is directed against the publisher's wife, Cory J. SerVaas, a journalism school and medical school graduate and a vice president of Curtis. One gathers that she is a woman of strong opinions.

There have been complaints also by freelance writers about slow pay and from cartoonists who claim that The Post has been reprinting material without their permission. Mr. SerVaas indicated that both of those situations were being ironed out.

Mr. SerVaas, who says he became interested in the fast-failing Curtis Publishing Company because of its Jack and Jill children's magazine, ended up buying the company's stock from the estate of Cyrus Curtis for, he said, about \$200,000.

He already had the Review Publishing Company, which

he acquired in 1957 when it consisted only of one failing magazine, Trap & Field, the official publication of the Amateur Trapshooters Association.

Since then he has started two more magazines and acquired seven others. They are all children's trade or special-interest publications.

Review Publishing was merged into Curtis last year, Mr. SerVaas said.

Well before he'd gotten into publishing, Mr. SerVaas, who had been with the Office of Strategic Services in the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II, had built and sold a successful

metal-plating company. Then, in 1967, he bought the bankrupt North Vernon Forge, Inc., which today is producing tools, and parts for the automotive industry.

Also operated from the low, white glazed brick building in Indianapolis, whose only identification is "SerVaas" in blue script, is SerVaas Laboratories. It manufactures Bon Ami, Bar Keepers Friend and a number of other cleaning products.

There are those among Mr. SerVaas's critics those who say that far more than a management philosophy, his success has been due to his ability at gaining successful financing that has seen him through many shaky deals.

Some believe that Mr. Burkhart, who is also a director of Curtis, is his chief financial backer.

Mr. SerVaas denies this. "We've financed companies out of our earnings," he said, "there are no silent partners. No banks. No debts. We could be much bigger if I wanted a large debt structure and to gamble."

When he became "financially independent" in 1960, Mr. SerVaas said, he was inspired by the public service of Nelson A. Rockefeller and decided to go into politics.

Although he was neither a Democrat or Republican at the time, he decided on the Republican party to fight the Democrats who were then in power in Indianapolis. Today he's not only a booster of both Indianapolis and Indiana, but also the majority leader of the City-County Council.

When not involved with the Republican Action Committee and not manufacturing or publishing or going to medical school (he expects to finish next year), Mr. SerVaas can sometimes be found at home relaxing while working out a mathematics equation.

An Indianapolis observer said that Mr. SerVaas's "bizarre range of interests and varied activities have prompted an aura of mysteriousness" and that he is "not always understood by those at home."